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# The Democratic Delusion: New Media, Resistance and Revolution in Serbia 1995-2000

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**Abstract:** The article analyses the use of new media by the resistance to Slobodan Milošević's regime in Serbia in 1995-2000. It focuses on the early use of the internet by the independent radio station B92 and the oppositional organisation Otpor. The article challenges the technological determinism of the Google Doctrine that suggests digital revolutions should lead to liberal democracy. This insight is significant in the light of the failure of the opposition to Milošević and the so-called 'Bulldozer Revolution' as well as other so-called 'colour revolutions' in the former communist states to establish viable democratic institutions at the end of the 20th century. The opposition, for all the richness of its cultural manifestations, its over-identifications with dominant ideologies, its creativity, instantaneity and performativity, essentially lacked a thorough modernist programme of political emancipation. New media opened up an ideological space that accommodated neo-liberal and anti-authoritarian values instead of those of liberal democracy.

**Keywords:** New media, post-communist, revolution, opposition, resistance, internet, neo-liberalism, democracy, over-identification

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The title of this article, coincidentally, echoes that of Evgeny Morozov's most recent book, *The Net Delusion* (2011), which is discussed in this issue's review section. Similar to Morozov's work, the arguments set out below also throw down a challenge to the tenets of the so-called Google Doctrine that presumes the digital revolution (with its imperatives of global capitalism and consumerism) will inevitably lead to the rise of liberal democracy. The article focuses on the opposition to Slobodan Milošević's regime in Serbia between 1995-2000, precisely because it was a period when digital technologies and new media seemed to open up the ideological space to accommodate neo-liberal and anti-authoritarian values.

The opposition in Serbia put new media to good and early use and this essay examines its impact on the individual subject as activist at an historical moment when analogue communi-

cation was significantly supplemented for the first time by new media and its technologies.<sup>1</sup> As I have already indicated, dominant views have associated new media with emancipatory liberal democratic notions of individual freedom and political liberty (Sharp 2005; Helvey 2004; Friedman 1999). A close historical analysis of the uses and meaning of new media in the high profile activities of the opposition organization Otpor [Resistance] and the independent radio station B92 in Serbia shows how this may not necessarily be the case.

Historical evidence supports the contention put forward in various ways by theorists such as Régis Debray (2007), Friedrich Kittler (1999) and Slavoj Žižek (1997) that technological and ideological change go hand in hand. The analysis demonstrates how at this particular historical juncture in the mid 1990s, which saw the development of digital technologies, the aesthetic logic of the new media had a networked, individualized form suited for single-issue politics and individual choice. At the same time the same new media were also implicated in neo-liberal ideologies and neo-conservative discourses of resistance and freedom, rather than liberal democratic discourses linked with older ideas of political liberty and social revolution commonly associated with the demonstrations of 1968 and the civic unrest followed by political change in the region during 1989. Contrary to claims by Gene Sharp (2005), Robert Helvey (2004) and others, this insight is particularly significant in the light of the failure of the opposition to Milošević and the so-called Bulldozer Revolution under discussion and other so-called 'colour revolutions'<sup>2</sup> in former communist states to establish viable democratic institutions in the early twenty-first century. In other words, the opposition, for all the richness of its cultural manifestations, in its satirical overidentifications with dominant ideologies, creativity, instantaneity and performativity essentially lacked a thorough programme of political emancipation in the traditional modernist sense.<sup>3</sup>

This analysis concentrates on the independent radio station B92 and the oppositional organisation Otpor and its website for three reasons. Firstly, their employment of new media and the early use of the web was necessarily unnaturalized and relatively unformed. Ironically, a partial state ban that hampered the opposition's widespread use of traditional print and broadcast media encouraged these groups' exploitation of the possibilities offered by the internet. Throughout the period under discussion, the regime did reluctantly tolerate some independent press and radio outlets, as a demonstration of its 'democratic' credentials to the outside world. Nevertheless, the authorities periodically shut down or curtailed the activities of B92, for example, and in retaliation the radio station used e-mail and uploads to external websites and broadcasters to maintain the flow of independent news. While it is accurate to say Otpor coordinated one of the earliest European examples of the political use of the internet it played a much smaller role than in the subsequent 'revolutions' inspired by the Serbian example in Ukraine, Georgia and elsewhere (Beissinger 2007).

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this essay new media embraces digital technologies: desktop computer and mobile phone; and digital media: e-mail, SMS, websites, pdf, jpeg, and mpeg.

<sup>2</sup> The colour revolutions took place in former Soviet and Communist States at the turn of the century: The Bulldozer Revolution in Serbia, 2000; Rose Revolution, Georgia, 2003; Orange Revolution, Ukraine, 2004; Tulip Revolution, Kyrgyzstan, 2005. In each case 'free' elections were followed by demonstrations and the overthrow of regimes perceived to be authoritarian by the opposition.

<sup>3</sup> George Bush in his State of the Union Address in 2002 declared the three American core values to be freedom, democracy and entrepreneurial freedom.

Secondly, since Serbia's was among the first political revolutions to adopt new media strategies it is essential to understand the processes by which the oppositional organisations were implicated in the extensive neoliberal discourses. Supported and financed to varying degrees by American and European NGOs, B92 and Otpor saw the histories of their use of digital technologies, digital media and corresponding networks of social relations incorporated into neo-liberal and neoconservative discourses of resistance and opposition, freedom and democracy, markets and enterprise. This observation is easily confirmed by preliminary Google searches for Otpor that lead directly to NGO websites and to the extensive, uncritical and participatory literature inspired and or written by Gene Sharp, Senior Scholar at the Albert Einstein Institute in Boston (Sharp 1973, 2005).

Thirdly and symptomatically, Otpor as a social organisation took advantage of the possibilities offered by the individualized and instantaneous aesthetic logic of the new media. This was achieved by adopting the performative forms and individualized structures available through the web and more usually associated with peer-to-peer communication and marketing strategies for commercial brands and established political parties in Western liberal democracies, rather than populist anti-government movements committed to opposing state violence in former communist states. This is significant as, for the first time since the French Revolution, older collective ideologies founded on notions of political liberty and individual emancipation were superseded by networks committed to opposition framed within corporate models of freedom and democracy.

### **New Media and Resistance**

Since Milošević's ascent to power in 1989 political dissidence in Serbia had had a long and unsuccessful history (Jennings 2009). Demonstrations in 1991-'92 and in 1996-'97 generated by participants with memories of 1968 and 1989 led to the creation of an increasingly influential counter elite embedded in universities and civic organizations. As an elite it was stimulated by the possibilities offered by the new media and was complemented by a burgeoning youth culture, focused on alternative social structures such as clubs, the creative arts and media outlets in print, vinyl and cassette, on the airwaves and the internet.

Originally, internet access was predominantly in the form of e-mail and had been granted by the state to Belgrade University, as the need for knowledge exchange in the international scientific community had become apparent. But under conditions of political repression, blatant corruption and the bankruptcy of the nationalist agenda in ethnic conflicts, those campaigning for greater academic freedom slowly mutated into a political group focused on the possibilities offered by the internet.<sup>4</sup> Established through the School of Electrical Engineering, the University of Belgrade opened up the Yugoslav Academic Network to help opposition to the regime. Sponsored by the Fund for an Open Society it was the only Yugoslav provider to offer affordable public internet access, e-mail and web space.

Radio B92 had linked to the University of Belgrade e-mail system as early as 1992 and in 1993 the broadcasters founded the Association for Independent Electronic Media (ANEM) in

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<sup>4</sup> The Yugoslav Computer Association (YUCCA) was established in January 1994 in the apartment of Novica Milic, who was employed by the Institute for Literature and Arts in Belgrade.

an attempt to consolidate independent local radio news coverage.<sup>5</sup> After the break up of Yugoslavia, sanctions imposed in 1992 by the UN Security Council on the newly created Yugoslav Federation of Serbia and Montenegro led to the shutdown of the connection to the European Academic Network (EARN) and also prevented any private or commercial internet links. In November 1995, after the Dayton Peace Agreement, some sanctions were lifted, internet access was re-enabled, and B92 set up OpenNet.org via a line rented from the Amsterdam-based XS4All internet provider. By 1996, among the discussion groups and sites for NGOs, anti-war campaigns and feminist groups that it hosted was The Students' Protest Initiative Board, the direct precursor to the Otpor website (Pantic 1992).

Radio B92 used the link for encrypted e-mail and the distribution of independent news to addresses worldwide and as a result played a crucial role in the development of new media for the opposition. Driven by the irreverent and anti-establishment culture of its editors and audience it pursued an agenda aimed at producing accurate reports of the war(s) and demonstrations in Belgrade and elsewhere in Serbia. When B92 was taken off the air by the government on 3 December 1996, it re-routed its broadcasts through OpenNet by RealAudio to create a mirror-site. This foiled government attempts at blocking and the transmissions were downloaded by Radio Free Europe, the Voice of America and the BBC World Service and were rebroadcast to Serbia and the international community. Its closure became the focus for civic rebellion and given the lack of success of government attempts at censorship the government allowed it back on the air two days later.

The students at the School of Electrical Engineering set up the website ETF Monkeys in 1998 to satirize government policy towards the university that had seen 58 politically inspired dismissals of academic staff. ETF Monkeys received widespread attention in the media through B92 and was a popular web destination hosted by Angelfire.com, which also carried B92 and the silicom.com mirror site for the B92 news archive. It was subjected to filtering by the authorities and all of the content on OpenNet – NGO websites, discussion groups, independent media and the 90 or so higher education institutions and research centres – was rendered temporarily inaccessible. A month later the ban was lifted in a pattern that repeated itself in different ways between March and June 1999 during the NATO bombing of Serbia and in the lead up to the elections of 24 September 2000.

Attempts by the regime to undermine links, domains and servers were continually frustrated by ANEM's web specialists and the students from the School of Electrical Engineering by using proxy servers, mirroring content and changing IP numbers (Markovic 2008; APC Country Report 2002). It was a situation where the bulk of the reliable news on what was happening on the ground came from the internet. New media found itself at the heart of the resistance to the regime because Real Audio and e-mail news bulletins circumvented government censorship and guaranteed a continuous flow of information to counter official accounts, while also providing an alternative to western news broadcasts,

The mobile phone and the text message were equally important, especially for physical manifestations of resistance. The landline telephone, in its fixity and vulnerability to surveillance and the deployment of its technology, was replaced by the mobile. This was an ex-

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<sup>5</sup> In 1997 they were legally registered (a requirement for all non-governmental media and civic organisations) and by 1998 had 33 members.

tremely effective organizational, operational and tactical tool for the distribution of coded SMS messages to get people out onto the streets in the right places, to warn them about police actions and to maintain the flexibility of word of mouth communication. Indeed, as Tario Kuzio (2006) has demonstrated, there is a correlation between internet and mobile use and increasing political instability under authoritarian regimes. Dramatic actions orchestrated by SMS and often comparable to artistic interventions, happenings and performances were designed to temporarily capture symbolically-charged city spaces and to attract the domestic and foreign media. One such action, for example, commemorated the first anniversary of the NATO bombing campaign with the coordinated distribution of 50,000 posters in 63 towns and cities within an hour (see Figure 1). Demonstrations were organized by mobile phone outside police stations where arrested activists were held. Mobile telephones and the internet, for example, were used to send the major campaign message “Gotov je! Šalji dalje!” [“He’s Finished! Forward!”] to over 150,000 subscribers, some of whom forwarded it on to others at home and abroad. Mobile phones also played a major part in the organisation of the Bulldozer Revolution and the march on Belgrade from Novi Sad on 5 October 2000 that saw the final collapse of the Milošević regime (Popovic 2001).

**Figure 1.** Otpor in action.



Source: <http://www.wri-irg.org/node/4540> (accessed February 2011).

Otpor's web presence was equally significant and its site was set up even before it had any offices. Otpor was established as an organization in 1998 as a non-party political base for the radically divided opposition to Slobodan Milošević's corrupt and illegitimate government. In spite of the best efforts of the NGOs that gave it support it did not have an explicit political agenda: neoconservative, or otherwise. The youthful quest of resisting authority and state repression and campaigning for individual freedom of expression was as unformulated as it

was nebulous, and rode on the back of already existing counter cultural forms immersed in a culture born of widespread dissatisfaction with the failures of the Milošević regime and, paradoxically, the desire for 'normality'.

The overriding objective was to secure victory over Milošević at the polls by creating a unified front. Otpor's core membership was urban, educated, youthful, cosmopolitan, relatively well travelled, in some respects pro-western and generally proficient in English. Their use of satire, humour and street theatre, as Matthew Collin has very effectively documented and to a certain extent mythologized, made civil resistance look stylish. The politicized activism of the 1980s transformed itself into a polysemous desire to rock the system in the closing years of the last century (Collin 2001, 2007; Simecka 2009). Crucially, this new generation offered no political alternative. Instead its power to coordinate the disparate opposition parties rested on literacy in the new digital media, youthful anti-establishment views and lifestyles, which in turn gave them power because they were recognized by the international media as technically, culturally and politically 'switched-on' individuals.

As the state controlled television broadcast the American film *Wag the Dog* (1997)<sup>6</sup> as an indictment of American foreign policy (Dichter 2000), digitized videos of police brutality, photographs and reports of demonstrations and actions in Belgrade and the provinces were made available through the various internet channels available to the independent media. As Matthew Collin points out, it 'was an irresistible story for a world fascinated by the digital boom. The stream of press articles generated by this hip, savvy bunch of wired dissidents triggered a barrage of international pressure on the regime' (Collin 2001: 114). Milan Brozic of the Serbian Renewal Party commented in affirmation: 'Without CNN, no doubt we would fail. That the media are here is one of our best successes. The internet helped get them here, and bring us more attention' (Bennahum 2004). The internet meant the regime could not control the media, and could no longer hide its repressive measures behind a screen of official pronouncements. Political candidate and engineering student Dusk Tomašević commented: 'With free media, all the subterfuge and dissembling of the regime mutates from threatening to comically absurd – the lie becomes a joke' (Bennahum 2004).

International exposure helped maintain the political pressure on the regime and according to David Bennahum, '[i]n a very real sense, these protests in Serbia are the first mature example of the internet playing a role in a popular uprising against an authoritarian regime ... this struggle is the first large-scale conflict where the internet is playing a significant role' (Bennahum 2004). Bennahum's observation is supported by Otpor activist Slobodan Djinovic, an engineering student at Belgrade University, who commented on the website as follows: 'Every day we have more than 70 recruits in Belgrade from the internet. And we use the media for very fast action – if someone is arrested, for example – and informing people through that medium' (ABC News 1999). Djino's point is contentious because at the time the web was slow and the number of people with access to the internet could be counted in thousands: there were perhaps as few as 10,000 subscribers in Serbia in 1998. Nevertheless, the international media guaranteed the resistance in Serbia the epithet of the 'Internet Revolution' (Bennahum 2004).

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<sup>6</sup> Released in 1997, the film tells the tale of Dustin Hoffmann as an aging Hollywood film producer and Robert de Niro as a political spin doctor who are hired to manufacture a fake war in Albania as a distraction from a presidential sex scandal during an election.

The dominant view of the role of new media in Serbia was expressed by Robert L. Helvey who was an important figure in the development and dissemination of the work of the Albert Einstein Institute in Serbia and elsewhere: ‘Computers, internet access, mobile and satellite phones, encryption programmes, television, and radio ... [are] ... major weapons of non-violent struggle’ (Helvey 2004: 89 & 129).<sup>7</sup> Alongside the calls from the founder of OpenNet, Drazen Pantic, for access to the internet to be recognized as a fundamental and basic human right, it seemed the hopes for the new technology as the harbinger of democracy, freedom and decentralization were being fulfilled (Pantic 1997). The new media created networks of shared interests described by the sociologist Manuel Castells as structures presenting ‘an unprecedented combination of flexibility and task implementation, of co-ordinated decision making, and de-centralized execution, which provide a superior morphology for all human action’ (Castells 2000: 15). To cast them as superior is perhaps to overstate the case, not least because the structures afforded by new media carried an ideological load. Timothy Garton Ash recorded a conversation with activist Momčilo Radulović: ‘I just want to live in a normal country ... I’m not a child of the internet’, he adds, referring to a frequent characterization of the protestors, ‘but I’d like to be’ (Garton Ash 2007).<sup>8</sup> Significantly, Garton Ash and his interviewee in *The New York Review of Books* implicitly recognized advanced communications technology as an important factor – alongside music of the Beatles and calls for democracy, freedom and the end of repression – in the anti-government demonstrations and in contributing to the self-identity of the participants. In doing so, he positioned Otpor in the vanguard of new media usage and within a politically liberal discourse comprehensible to the western intellectual elite.

## Methodology

This essay takes an historical approach informed by an extension of Régis Debray’s theory of the mediasphere (Debray 2007). For Debray any epoch was defined by the materiality of the dominant form of communication. My contention is that in this particular set of historical conditions new media had an (im)materiality, content and meaning that cannot be isolated from the means of their reproduction, the social and historical contexts in which they are communicated, or their implicit ideological values. The question at the heart of the essay addresses the degree to which material structures of communication carry an ideological load and produce meaning and cultural change in and of themselves, although frequently in concert with their ostensive content. The essay examines the Otpor website, for example, from the point of view of Friedrich Kittler’s theoretical position, following Marshall McLuhan, that ‘what remains of people is what media can store and communicate. What counts are not the messages or the content with which they equip so-called souls for the duration of the technological era, but rather their circuits, the very schematism of perceptibility’ (Kittler 1999: xl). The use of new media in this specific set of conditions also signals the historical shift that occurred at the moment when knowledge ceased to be reflective or contemplative

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<sup>7</sup> Significantly, Helvey developed ‘rules’ for maximizing the potential of new media in protest that, after training from the Institute, Otpor were to find useful.

<sup>8</sup> Radulović founded the Media Club website in Montenegro in 1999 during the NATO bombing helped by students from Belgrade University and draft dodgers from Serbia.



and became performative, pragmatic and non-discursive: 'Technological change is not divorced from ideology, and ideologies, as masks and disguises of material interests, remain even in the innocence of the internet' (Kittler 1999: xl-xli). Prevailing accounts of the advance of new media appear to confirm this observation in their identification of new media with the dominance of neoconservative free market ideologies and the synchronic collapse of systemic communism (Friedman 1999).

In the dominant global ideology, Slavoj Žižek observed, the political antagonisms of modernity were obsolete and had been replaced by a different politics where 'the dispassionate administration of social affairs goes hand in hand with aestheticized hedonism (the plurality of "ways of life")' (Žižek 1997: 28). As described by Žižek, the vision of western lifestyle choices associated with corporate capitalism was uncontaminated by imaginaries opposed to corporate or state influence. As a vision it was actively promoted by a number of western non-governmental organizations, such as the Fund for an Open Society which helped fund B92; and the Albert Einstein Institute which helped train and fund Otpor activists. These NGOs aimed to establish forms of civil society where institutionalized state interference and the politicization of the media was the norm. Their websites promoted their ideals and campaigned for them to be disseminated through education, the independent media and the internet. By the turn of the century, through these and other mechanisms, new media development was intertwined with a specifically western and neoconservative model of individual freedom associated with market populism, free markets and freedom of expression: a position very effectively critiqued by Thomas Frank (2000), for example.<sup>9</sup>

Significantly and with profound ideological effect, something of the physical continuity of the protests characterizing the revolutions that brought about the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1989 was supplemented and to a degree replaced by what the new media theorists Nicholas Gane and David Beer describe as 'the individual encounter in virtual space in a mass of singularities' (Gane & Beer 2008: 8). Digital communication, whether as SMS or web content found in hyperlinks, mpegs, jpegs, or pdfs, produced an artefactual environment where objects were physically absent, instantaneously available, infinitely reproducible, exchangeable, and easily disseminated domestically and internationally.

The need for physical objects to communicate messages of resistance – such as the photocopied photographs of police violence that circulated widely by hand as a counter to state controlled media during Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution (Aulich & Wilcox 1993: 18-19)

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<sup>9</sup> IREX Europe, for example, promotes its agendas of 'fairer, freer and more prosperous societies' through the mechanisms of education, independent media and internet development. Other organisations such as Freedom House, the National Endowment for Democracy, the National Democratic Institute, International Republican Institute and the European based Soros Foundation supported democratic revolutions within the post-Soviet region and elsewhere. Otpor received \$41 million in support from various NGOs. A few years later, in 2003, Georgian opposition movements established contact with Otpor, and Rose revolution activists attended Otpor workshops at the Serbian-based Center for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS) in Belgrade on a trip sponsored by the Soros Foundation. Later still, the Ukrainian *Pora* trained in Serbia at the Center for Nonviolent Resistance established by Otpor. Not only did Robert Helvey of the Albert Einstein Institute play an important role in these activities but Peter Ackerman, Chair of the Board of Trustees of Freedom House and the founder of the International Center of Nonviolent Conflict, encouraged broad-based coalitions to organise civil disobedience and helped train and set up alternative media networks to facilitate it. His film about the bulldozer revolution in Serbia, *Bringing Down A Dictator* (2001), produced by the American film company York Zimmerman, was an important teaching aid in these training sessions.

– was alleviated. The material artefact and the need for someone to actually hold it in serendipitous acts of communication at a geographical location was superseded by peer-to-peer SMS, e-mail sent to an addressee, or the decision of an activist to listen to a download or to visit a website. This took place in a series of structured communicative actions that emulated and reproduced liberal models of freedom of choice and the networks of the free market. Nevertheless, physical actions, graffiti, posters and stickers continued to play a vital part. Through its ‘marketing’ section, for example, Otpor was responsible for the logistics of distributing up to 60 tons of campaign material in the lead up to the elections of 24 September 2000 (Cohen 2000).

It is important to emphasise that pre-existing imagined self-identities in the opposition evolved alongside the ability to use and inhabit new media and its technologies. However, amongst these activities are the beginnings of new forms of virtual community. Because these protests were subject to a process where they became digitized news events, the easy distinctions between media, as understood in an analogue age, collapsed. Simultaneously, there was a tendency for these new forms of communication embodied in the mobile phone and the web to heighten an already established sense of individualism. The accelerated connectivity between people, media and physical objects produced ‘networks’ to mirror the non-political, ‘leaderless’ cell-like underground organisation of Otpor, which grew in popularity and became the dominant focus for discontent and a vehicle for its well publicized objectives of removing Milošević and its rather more indeterminate and ill-defined ambitions for freedom, democracy and normality.

### The Site

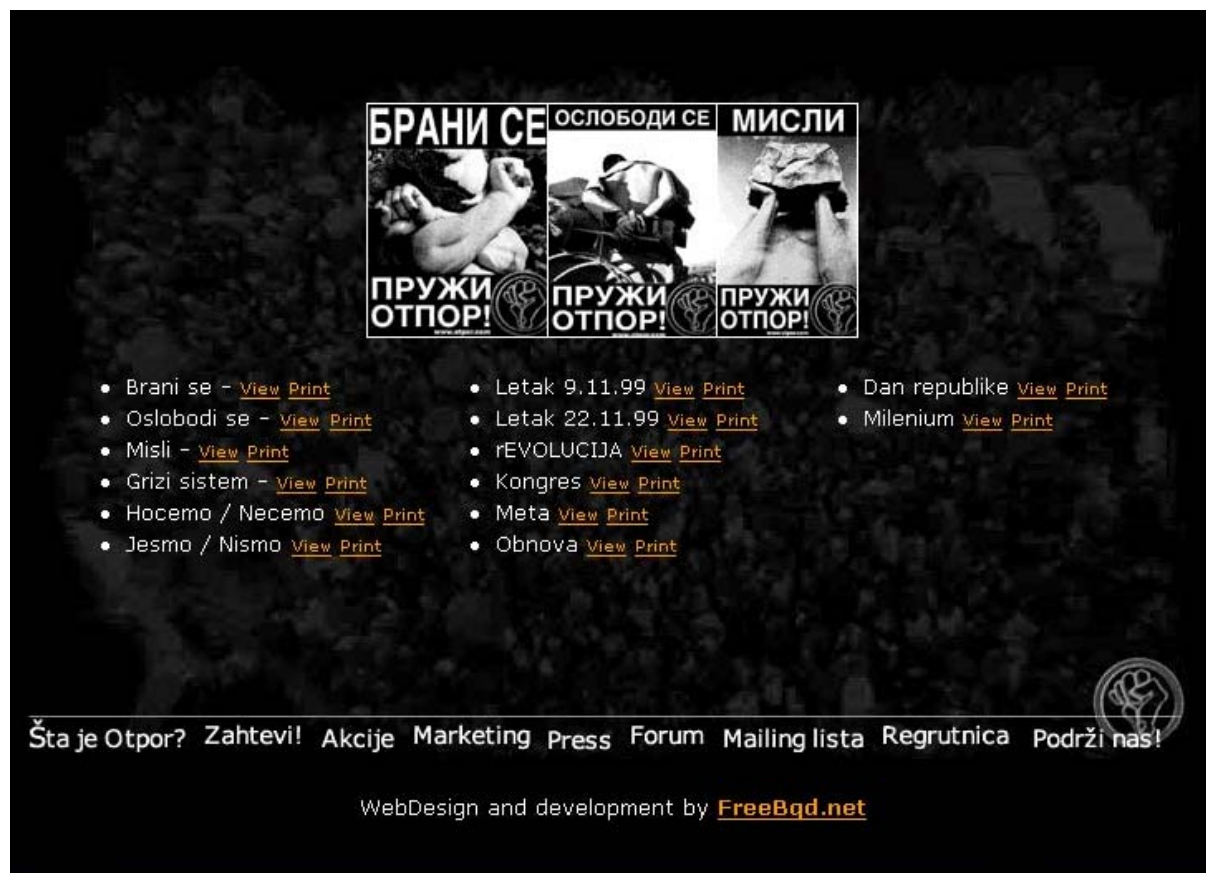
The Otpor website was established in 1998 and its first archived trace dates from 28 November 1999 (Otpor.com 20.11.2000). The original homepage was text based and in simple statements called for free elections and the ending of the recent legislation restricting the freedom of the media and the universities. If one accesses the site through the Internet Archive, the homepage is at first obscured by a ‘Stop the Trial of Otpor!’ announcement detailing the arrest and detention of activists in Smederevo. It was a single notification to its visitors of government moves against Otpor, in what was soon to become a deluge of announcements as the site developed.

The designer and photographer Igor Jeremic created and maintained the site from September 1999 to October 2000.<sup>10</sup> He introduced black backgrounds and black-and-white graphics of poster designs interspersed with colour photographs of demonstrations and actions. In comparison with the UK New Labour Party website established in 1997, for example, it was seriously youthful, highly sophisticated and had a ‘look’ associated with the regional counterculture (see Figures 2 & 3).

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<sup>10</sup> Jeremic was also a founder of the Free Belgrade website covering culture and politics in Belgrade, prior to which he was one of the founders of ISGF, the Internet Service of the Faculty of Civil Engineering (Jeremic 2009) in 1997.

**Figure 2.** Screen grab of the Otpor website as designed by Igor Jeremic.



Source: <http://old.jwork.net/cv/> (accessed 10 August 2010).

By 16 August 2000 the site featured a news archive of almost 50 pages and well over 150 items of domestic news. The pages conveyed general policy points emphasising the non-political nature of the movement, dissatisfaction with quarrelsome opposition politics and politicians and its desire to present a unified front. The objective was the removal of Milošević through non-violent means and the establishment of a free and democratic Serbia. This was to be achieved through civil disobedience and by getting people to the ballot box, particularly the 300,000 students who would be eligible to vote for the first time in the elections called for 24 September. Arranged in reverse chronology the pages gave detailed accounts, liberally illustrated with photographs and occasional video footage of demonstrations, protests, actions, events, exhibitions, arrests, court cases, police raids and beatings. It documented the regime's legislative attempts to curb the opposition and to label Otpor – in an echo of Communist rhetoric – as a fascist, terrorist, pro-American, anti-patriotic movement run by drug addicts, criminals and social parasites.

**Figure 3.** Screen grab of the Otpor website as designed by Igor Jeremic.



Source: <http://old.jwork.net/cv/> (accessed 10 August 2010).

The pages also reproduced John Simpson's report from *The Sunday Times* (Otpor.com 06.06.2000) on the weakness of the divided opposition; carried a long letter from Professor Milan Merkle who had been removed from his post as Professor in the Faculty of Electrical Engineering; covered the dismissal of judges; and documented Otpor's own unsuccessful attempts to be officially registered as a civic organization. A section titled 'What is Otpor' gave an account of its spontaneous establishment among a group of students at Belgrade University and especially the Philological Faculty, which championed resistance to the new law that gave the government the power to appoint staff, determine the curriculum and effectively close the universities in May 2000. Under the slogan 'RESISTANCE to Victory!' it explained the meaning of the clenched fist as a symbol of individual initiative and freedom. A declaration for the future of Serbia called for elections monitored by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the opening up of the country to international organizations such as the UN, and the acceptance of international law, specifically calling for compliance with the Hague Tribunal for War Crimes.

A further 25 pages listed the actions carried out by members of the movement. Many of the actions were a product of a youth culture immersed in overidentification. Carnavalesque and, often, humorous actions challenged the dominant order, its iconographies, symbolisms, and calendars of official events and the old media environments they inhabited.

**Figure 4.** Activists celebrate Milošević's birthday, August 2000.



Source: [www.aforcemorepowerful.org/films/bdd/story/otpor/sticker-shock.php](http://www.aforcemorepowerful.org/films/bdd/story/otpor/sticker-shock.php) (accessed 10 February 2010).

Actions 'celebrated' Milošević's birthday or the award of medals to state officials and the heroes of the war against NATO, for example (see Figure 4). Overidentification had developed as an oppositional subcultural strategy in Slovenia during the 1980s. The post-punk, multi-media art group *Neue Slovenische Kunst* (NSK) (see Figure 5) strove to undermine the symbolisms of both the regime and neo-liberalism in acts that obsessively and repetitively parodied their demands and drew attention to what their power structures wanted to conceal (Monroe 2005). Highly creative and essentially nihilistic oppositional happenings, street theatre events, graffiti alongside the emphasis on free expression created a sense of ambiguity that unsettled not only the authorities but sections of the community at large, not least because they drew upon a shared sense of Serbian identity rooted in romantic victimhood and the freedom of the vagabond (more of this below).<sup>11</sup>

In another act of overidentification Otpor capitalized on the tendency of the regime to draw upon the legacy of Titoist resistance to Nazism during the Second World War and traced the origins of its own name to the term 'Resistance' and the symbol of the fist in the same partisan struggle (Jansen 2000).<sup>12</sup> In other words, the fist emulated the official anti-fascist propaganda aimed at NATO and simultaneously promoted through new media a brand without a product, that is, a desirable alternative and oppositional lifestyle choice rather than a political stance.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, to signal their widening appeal and change from a student to populist movement many items featured the Otpor Mothers, who were regularly fielded to protect their sons and daughters during actions against the police in an open challenge to their masculinity.

<sup>12</sup> It was designed by Duda (Nenad Petrovic), a young graphic designer from Belgrade Popovic, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Iconographically, the fist belongs to a long international tradition in the visual culture of labour activism as a symbol of strength, unity and defiance in the face of oppression. In Serbia, its significance was at once more complex and visceral: the clenched fist was the symbol of the Serbian communist partisans who resisted the Nazis and the Croatian *Ustasha* during the Second World War. The cost in human lives was devastating and the memory lingered in the Serbian national psyche. Paradoxically, by the turn of the century it symbolized national liberation and communist repression. Milošević's pursuit of a Greater Serbia in the name of a mythopoeic nationalism in ethnic war had brought about widespread displacement, physical suffering and economic decline, while sanctions and the NATO bombing campaign during 1999 not only made things worse but signalled direct western interference. In other words, the anti-fascist connotations of the fist, therefore, would have had historical and iconographical resonance with resistance to unjust imposed orders from within and without, as the op-



**Figure 5.** The Neue Slovenische Kunst group.

Source: [www.kultmuenchen.de/konzerte/pop-rock/event/Laibach\\_muenchen\\_7849.html](http://www.kultmuenchen.de/konzerte/pop-rock/event/Laibach_muenchen_7849.html) (accessed 10 February 2011).

Along with the predominantly typographical posters the schematic clenched fist was in black and white and was available widely and instantaneously as a pdf. It was cheap and easy to print professionally or at home and was eminently suitable for reproduction and distribution in many different forms such as e-mail, screen print, handout, flyer, poster, stencil or graffiti: its successful dissemination and presence consolidated Otpor's rebellious 'brand recognition'.

On the website the 'Press' hyperlink took the visitor to some thirty articles from the international press.<sup>14</sup> The 'History of Recent Student Protests' (Otpor.com 26.08.2000) led to articles in *Index on Censorship* and other international journals such as *New Republic* dating back to 1996. Pride of place is given to Timothy Garton Ash's article published in *The New York Review of Books*, 'In the Serbian Soup' (1997), which placed the internet, opposition and certain kinds of independent popular culture in combination with an older idealistic nationalism. According to Garton Ash it spoke for a love of the country rather than the mythopoetic chauvinism found in the state propaganda it parodied (Colovic 2002; Judah 1997).

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position resisted the internal repression of the state and the state resurrected cold war rhetoric to demonise NATO as a fascist invader.

<sup>14</sup> Links included features from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, ABC News, *L'Express*, Human Rights Watch, CNN, Associated Press, Times Higher Education Supplement, *BBC World Service*, *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Financial Times*, Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, and *Jane's Intelligence Review*.

As might be expected, the website was highly selective in its paradigms. It presented an archive for visitors to navigate and select items according to individual interests, whether they accessed the site as an activist, a foreign journalist, a member of an NGO such as the Albert Einstein Institute, a NATO or UN official, or a supporter of the regime. It did not present a singular narrative to a mass audience, but instead confronted the individual with a montage of themes or categories within a carefully selected archive that could be perused at will, in structures of experience analogous to the relationships established between individuals in the networks generated by the new media.<sup>15</sup>

As far as it can be retrieved today and as it existed until the collapse of the regime, the site represented a vision of how the organization saw itself and how it would like to be perceived by the rest of the world. There were accounts from Otpor activists of detainment and rough handling by the police, speeches, demonstrations and actions. Overall, the emphasis is on youth, newness and a throwing off of the past, suspicion of politicians of any complexion, including those from the opposition parties, and evidence of increasing support from intellectuals, artists, teachers and the population at large in a 'David and Goliath' story with no certain outcome.

As a discourse, for example, it made Arkan the militia leader, gangster and war criminal, Željko Ražnatović, a hero to the regime, and simultaneously, a highly marketable 'Keith Richards rock 'n' roll renegade' for the western press (see Figure 6).<sup>16</sup> To be involved with resistance was to sit alongside the authoritarian propaganda of the state and the freedoms of global corporatism. It implicitly engaged with an edgy Byronic romanticism tinged with the heroic outsiderism, anarchic independence and anti-establishmentarianism that simultaneously informed stereotypes of what it meant to be Serbian and to belong to a contemporary bohemian urban cultural elite, in part defined by its immersion in new media and neo-liberal ideologies.

The core members of Otpor either identified with or lived on the fringes of official society. With uncertain means of support as independent journalists, anarchic subversives, disaffected youth, musicians, actors, artists, street performers, fans of certain kinds of independent music and in the urban centres, students and youthful hedonists, they engaged in what the authorities regarded as disreputable social activities. The type embraced all those who opposed the ideologies of the state and to whom literacy in new media technology and the valued possession of a mobile phone and access to a computer was an integral part of their continued existence and self-understanding. Drazen Pantic, a mathematician from Belgrade University and founder of OpenNet, had allied himself to the radio station B92 because of what he saw as its 'libertarian spirit and urban sensibility – no other radio station in Serbia played Tom Waits or Nick Cave' (Collin 2001: 113). Likewise, Veran Matic, its editor in chief, saw it as a lifeline for 'alternative rockers, rebel artists and clubbers' (Csapo-Sweet &

<sup>15</sup> The links were named: News archive; What is Otpor!; Demands; Written Documents; Otpor! Actions; Press; History of Recent Yugoslav Student Protests; Artwork; Recruiting Form; Support Us; Marketing; Otpor! Links.

<sup>16</sup> Annie Leibovitz's photographs of nationalist militiamen from the siege of Sarajevo looking like rock 'n' roll rebels appeared in *Vanity Fair* in 1993.

Shields 2000: 359). Its audience was in many ways, but not unambiguously, western in orientation, metropolitan, bohemian and anti-establishmentarian.<sup>17</sup>

**Figure 6.** Željko ‘Arkan’ Ražnatović, in front of his paramilitary group, the Serb Volunteer Guard (‘Arkan's Tigers’) in 1991.



Source: [www.labocaresort.com/index.php?option=com\\_awiki&view=mediawiki&article=Željko\\_Ražnatović&Itemid=113](http://www.labocaresort.com/index.php?option=com_awiki&view=mediawiki&article=Željko_Ražnatović&Itemid=113) (accessed 10 February 2011).

As we have discussed, for the resistance, its western interpreters, journalists and NGOs alike, this image of the activist was infected by communitarian memories of the early web and the promise of unimagined creativity and hedonistic relief from state repression or market control (Flichy 1999). As a vision it was distinct from the model offered by the marketplace and promoted by the NGOs. Beyond the small-scale cultural entrepreneurialism of the local radio station, club, fanzine and popular music group and the desire for freedom of expression, the

<sup>17</sup> By the time of the annulment of election results in 1996, B92 was a relatively sophisticated alternative lifestyle organization with thirty-five staff promoting clubs and free enterprise arts activities in a multimedia cultural centre. It had also extended its activities into publishing, making documentaries and producing news clips for television.



opposition had little in common with the civic objectives of a globalized corporate world. The opposition's view of itself was necessarily coloured by the realities of the regime, the risk of arrest, the conditions of war and its deprivations, cultural isolation, media censorship, political repression and precious little freedom of choice except those offered through new media. These realities fed into discourses of heroic failure, victimhood and resistance common to a whole variety of identities encapsulated within atavistic official and hedonistic unofficial constructions of what it meant to be Serbian. Social anthropologist Stef Jansen, for example, found a shared 'solidarity in resistance' in the democratic dissent against the regime in 1996-'97 and the protests against the NATO bombing in 1999 in the forms of performative action (the jokes, the high jinx, theatre, concerts, demonstrations small and large) and in the expansion of the terrain of resistance to the internet which now made them visible (Jansen 2000).

### **The New Mediasphere**

Otpor's graphic symbol of the fist drew together paradoxical associations and provided a visual anchor for a collective sense of identity capable of confusing, if not transcending, state propaganda. But while the 'image' is, indeed, independent of its medium from the point of view of its direct sensory perception, the medium of its delivery – its technological reproduction – impinged upon how it was perceived, its meanings and its relationship to the self-understanding of the viewer as an empathetic subject. W.J.T. Mitchell theorized that ideologies are grounded in specific image repertoires where 'the common space of a scene of recognition' is conceived as 'the link between ideology and iconology that shifts both sciences from an epistemological cognitive ground (the knowledge of objects by subjects) to an ethical, political and hermeneutic ground (the knowledge of subjects by subjects)' (Mitchell 1994: 33). In other words, the techniques to which images are exposed generated a world subject to the technologies of which they are a product, in this case the aesthetic logic of the internet, digital media and its neoliberal connotations. Older forms of political struggle rooted in the politics of class and economic structures had been exposed for their existing absurdities in Milošević's Serbia and were excluded from the instantaneity of communication and the identification of a common interest that stimulated and promoted action, but lacked the basis for a sustained political philosophy.

Régis Debray, in his defence of socialist and modernist progressive politics collapsed the technological and the ideological in much the same way as those propagandists for global capitalism equated freedom, democracy and global market ideologies with new media development (Debray 2007; Friedman 1999). For Debray, print and the electronic media were distinct in terms of their production and meaning. The pamphlet and the book, for example, required a coming together of the activist, the intellectual and the artisan. The printer and the typographer were the quintessential 'worker intellectual or intellectual worker', active in the conception and reproduction of the abstract ideas and the analytical tools of a progressive European tradition of social democracy, preserved in the written word as a story of 'archivists and old papers' (Debray 2007: 8).

Until 1989-91 and the collapse of communism in central Europe, 'actually existing socialism' had preserved this tradition in the book and the pamphlet. Bureaucratic communism

was its aspic, and with no small historical irony the 'totalitarian hijacking of the Enlightenment, set against the new global imagery, could even make the defeat of Diderot at the hand of Disneyland look like emancipation' (Debray 2007: 13-14). Christopher R. Tunnard, the contemporary commentator on the media in Serbia, saw the internet as the natural inheritor of the free press where people recognized and identified themselves as part of a national, if not international community (Tunnard 2003: 100). In contrast, Debray sensed in the eclipse of print a loss of political content and a dissociation of political theory from practice: 'the finger that presses a button, fast-forwarding a tape or disc, will never pose a danger to the establishment' (Debray 2007:8). He perceived a disjuncture between the intellectuals and the people in a set of new forms of labour, where the print shops and the presses that once provided a physical focus for people of different professions, classes and persuasions to exchange ideas were replaced by isolated individuals at their computer stations. Simultaneously, he identified a shift from word to image with the decline of the political party and its metamorphosis from an ideological to a managerial machine in a transformative process that separated emancipatory agendas from popular resistance movements and subjected them to the bureaucratic forces of the market (Debray 2007: 18).

Debray was writing in 1991, before the market exploitation of the internet had undermined the utopian hopes of the internet community as a playful environment free of the hierarchies of state, capital and the censor. But memory is more important than reality. The imagination defined the meaning of the internet nostalgically, regardless of its appropriation and control by the very forces of state or capital it had sought to challenge. Paradoxically, these memories allowed values of anarchic anti-authoritarianism to become the preferred ideological construction of the individual in a globalized world, a shift paralleled by the change in the technical means of production in communications from analogue to digital.

Such an observation is particularly pertinent when considering the role of Gene Sharp in the development of Otpor as a model for nonviolent resistance against authoritarian post-communist governments in the region (Sharp 2005). Sharp's account of Otpor's activities provided a linear analysis of the events leading to Milošević's downfall, where the apolitical approach of the opposition embraced a variety of supporters from across the political spectrum. Resistance, often in cultural forms and cultural exchange defined by the new media, was what they shared. However, the opportunistic choice for Vojislav Koštunica as its figurehead to lead the unified opposition because he was the most media friendly and acceptable of the politicians was symptomatic of the opposition's apolitical stance.

The tragedy was that Otpor, articulated to a large extent through the structures afforded by new media, could only demonstrate a community of interest aimed at ridding the country of Milošević. It had no thoroughgoing political agenda and was empty at its core. When it did organise itself as a political party, it failed. Its grass roots support dissipated in the relatively successful attainment of liberal freedoms, whose relationships to free markets and corporate globalism were left unexamined. The dark side of the liberal democratic dream remained unchallenged, the neo-liberal hegemony of the internet unquestioned, and ultimately the democratic will of the people ignored. Its political agenda and ideological standpoint of resistance were ultimately as hollow as its historical objective of overturning dictatorship was important. Otpor certainly made no demands for humane and democratic emancipation from neo-

liberal orthodoxies, and the fact that this was never part of their agenda underscores the point.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, organizations and groups campaigning for change in Serbia made good use of new media technology. Texts and e-mail enabled peer-to-peer communication, digital broadcasting and the internet facilitated the consumption of independent news and creative products that offered a challenge to the state, and at the same time disseminated information concerning countercultural, anti-authoritarian activity such as street art, events, performance, theatre and clubbing. These activities were complicated by the implication of new media in the construction of alternative and oppositional lifestyles and products under conditions of state repression, where corporate interests were yet to establish themselves. Ideologically, therefore, in line with Otpor's desire to reach beyond the constraints of state political, cultural and media institutions, the new media offered the hope for the end of repression and greater individual expression. This took place in a virtual environment of little interest to the state, where the authorities had not considered the computer as anything other than a calculating machine. Furthermore, these new media structures carried with them a memory of the internet as its pioneers had originally imagined it, as a creative playground free from state or corporate interference. For a variety of reasons, this ideological load was highly attractive to members of the opposition eager to emulate their (mis)understandings of models of political, social and cultural life offered by western democracies, themselves made more available through the imaginaries of the new media and emphasized in the alliances made with western NGOs. In other words, as Gane and Beer (2008: 107) have argued, the networks of global capitalism were embedded within new media communication structures in ways beyond the control of the users. This engendered individualized, interest-driven identities, rather than socially or politically coherent identities and communities in the tradition of social democracy as it had evolved since the French Revolution.

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